DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 300 CE 038 139

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TITLE	Strategies for Adult Literacy Development.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Jan 84
NOTE	11p.; Paper presented at the National Adult Literacy Conference (Washington, DC, January 19-20, 1984). For other conference papers, see CE 038 126-138.
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; Adult Education; Adult Learning; *Adult Literacy; Andragogy; *Delivery Systems; Educational Improvement; *Educational Needs; Educational Philosophy; *Educational Policy; English (Second Language); Futures (of Society); Government Role; *Literacy Education; *Policy Formation; Second Language Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	*National Adult Literacy Project

ABSTRACT

As articulated by President Reagan, the Adult Literacy Initiative has two goals: to raise all adults in the country to a functional reading level and to focus on promoting literacy among adults--not "stamping out" or "attacking" illiteracy. Professionals at the National Adult Literacy Project and Conference considered the problems of adult literacy education, raising eight main issues in their papers. First of all, the speakers emphasized a need to understand better the adult literacy problem in the United States. Closely related to the first concern is the necessity to understand better the need for adults to have different kinds of skills and knowledges for the future. A third issue is the need to have a better understanding of the various delivery systems for adult literacy development, their clients, and their effectiveness. The problems of adults who must learn English as a second language raise issues unique to this population and must be considered separately from the rest of adult basic education. Closely related to the issues surrounding the teaching of English as a second language is the need to understand literacy problems in the United States by comparison to the literacy problems in the rest of the world. An issue of central concern for all of the presenters is the need to understand the difference between the development of literacy during childhood and in adulthood, while the seventh issue they raised is the need to understand better the use of technology in the development and delivery of adult literacy programs. Finally, the eighth issue concerns the need for a clearly articulated national policy for adult literacy development. (KC)

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ME 83-P-0073

Strategies for Adult Literacy Development

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Introduction

On September 7, 1983, speaking at the White House to a gathering of American citizens concerned with adult literacy problems in the United States, President Reagan announced that the federal government was joining with many private citizen, state and local government, and business and industry groups in a nationwide *Adult Literacy Initiative*.

Addressing the need for a truly national effort to engage the serious problems of adult literacy needs, the President stated our goal in the *Adult Literacy Initiative:*

> "...it will take a united effort by all our people to achieve our goal: The elimination of adult functional illiteracy in the united States."

Then, placing the problem of adult literacy development squarely in the vanguard of efforts to improve our national economy and security, the President went on to state:

> "In this decade, America faces serious challenges on many fronts: To our National security, our economic prosperity, and our ability to compete in the international marketplace. If we're to renew our economy, protect our freedom, we must sharpen the skills of every American mind and enlarge the potential of every individual American

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life. Unfortunately, the hidden problem of adult illiteracy holds back too many of our citizens, and as a nation, we, too, pay a price."

Literacy as Functional Skills

There are two aspects of President Reagan's comments that I want to develop for a moment before proceeding to the overview of topics and issues which are addressed by the speakers at this conference. One aspect concerns the use of the term "functional" in stating our goal as the elimination of adult "functional" illiteracy, and the other aspect concerns the use of the term "literacy" in naming this national initiative the Adult Literacy Initiative.

First, regarding the use of the term "functional" in stating our national goal, it seems to me that, in distinction to earlier federal government programs which approached reading problems primarily as a "right" of citizens to read, and which emphasized literacy as a more or less personal goal to be valued as an end in itself, the President has expressed a view that both research and the practical experience of adult educators supports; and that is that, by and large, adults who undertake literacy development do so for the practical, functional value of literacy. They tend, as a group, to view literacy as a means to other goals, not, for the most part, as an end in and of itself (Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox, 1975; Sticht, 1975; Hunter and Harmon, 1979).

Consistent with this functional view of literacy held by those adults who wish to develop higher levels of knowledge and skill, the President expressed the point of view that, as a matter of national policy, the development of adult literacy skills is to be considered as a vital means to be used in reaching the goals of improved national security, so that our fundamental freedoms may be adequately protected, and improved ability to compete in the international marketplace and further the economic prosperity of all our citizens.

Thus, by focussing on the functional nature of literacy, the President has brought into alignment the national policy, the contemporary views of adult educators, and perhaps most

significantly, the views of those adults who seek the benefits of improved literacy. Furthermore, by recognizing the practical utility of literacy to all of us as a nation, and not as simply an individual's personal pursuit (though it may also be that), it seems to me that we must consider that adults have not only the "right to read", they have an *obligation* to read and to develop the levels of literacy that are needed to secure both personal and national freedom.

And that brings me to the second aspect of the President's remarks that I wish to briefly comment on, those having to do with the naming of the initiative the Adult Literacy Initiative, with an emphasis on the word "literacy".

Now, the point I wish to make is an obvious one, but one which has important implications that are not always made apparent. My point is that, while the elimination of adult functional illiteracy is our stated goal, the means to achieving that goal is the development of adult literacy. That is to say, "illiteracy" per se does not itself exist; rather it is literacy, embodied in people capable of commanding the written word and the knowledge and skill in language, mathematics, and other subject matter for using the written word which exists. By focussing the present initiative upon the development of adult literacy, the fallacy is avoided of attempting to "stamp out" a "blight", or to wage a once and for all "attack against illiteracy" which reifies a construct understandable only by reference to its being the absence of something else, in this case literacy. The reification of illiteracy has led too often to the initiation of one-shot, "wars" in which large numbers of students, workers, and teachers have set out to "erradicate illiteracy", only to discover that each new generation that fails to develop literacy leads to a new "crop" of illiterates.Nowhere has this fallacy of reification of illiteracy been more evident than in those mass literacy campaigns reported by Bhola (1981) in which no provisions were made to develop the national political, governmental, and educational organizational structures needed to make possible the continuous development of literacy in both childhood and adulthood.

In this country, the idea that illiteracy is "a thing" or "condition" of an individual that can be "stamped out" or "cured" rather quickly has seen expression in the numerous "quick-fix"

programs that attempt to solve eighteen or more years of literacy problems in brief, 25 to 100 or 200 or so hours of adult "remedial" literacy training. Such programs, without the marshalling of political, governmental, and general public support, such as exists for the education of children, have repeatedly been found to produce only the most limited of educational and socioeconomical returns to that very limited number of adults who participate in them, as the papers to be reported here today document.

And so, to me, the fact that the present initiative focusses upon the development of adult literacy as a legitimate aspect of our nation's human resources development policies and activities, augers well for replacing the stigma that the label of "illiterate" may produce, and instilling instead, the courage that many adults need to seek out and participate in programs of education that are well designed, institutionalized, and executed to permit the full development of literacy by adults at all levels of skill and in various life circumstances.

National Adult Literacy Project and Conference

As one of several components in the Adult Literacy Initiative, the U.S. Department of Education, operating through the National Institute of Education, has sponsored the National Adult Literacy Project which, in turn, is conducting this National Conference on Adult Literacy.

There are several aspects of this conference which I think make it unique among conferences that I have attended in the past that were concerned with adult literacy problems.

(1.) The conference is a part of the National Adult Literacy Project, and as such it has a vehicle for carrying out ideas and suggestions that arise in these next two days.

(2.) The conference focusses on all levels of literacy needs of adults, including the unique problems produced by the displacement of workers due to technological changes and international shifts in market conditions. Such changes are producing radical shifts in the need for adult education and continued literacy development.

(3.) For the first time, the conference brings together representatives from organizational settings (military, business and industry,prisons,community colleges) and considers the

aims and missions of such organizations in setting the objectives of adult literacy development. That is to say, it is recognized that in such organizational settings, the requirements for literacy are defined by the organization, not the individual. From this perspective, the interests of the individual are subordinate to the goals and missions of the organization, and the design of literacy programs aims to develop the literacy skills of the individual in the most cost-effective way for achieving the organization's goals.

(4.) New concepts and understandings of adult literacy and its development are brought out in this conference. Among these are the results of recent research that indicates that long held beliefs about the learning skills of many adult literacy students are wrong, and that these incorrect beliefs have led to the implementation of inadequate literacy programs for adults.

(5.) Building on the new understandings of adult literacy, new methods for developing cost-effective adult literacy programs are identified.

(6.) The very important problem of teaching literacy and language skills to adults who are studying English as a Second Language is recognized as a distinctly different problem from that of adult basic education for native language speakers, and is given a special hearing at this conference.

(7.) In a very important shift from previous conferences concerned with adult literacy problems, the present conference considers the importance of literacy development not only for adults, but also for the future educability of the adult's children. The very real possibility that investment in the education of adults can have payoff in improving the education of children, thereby providing "double duty dollars" for education, merits further study in the National Adult Literacy Project.

Overview of Issues for the Conference

At this time I want to turn to a discussion of various issues which are addressed in the papers that are to be presented in the remainder of this conference. My intent is to provide a general background of information that can be used to better understand the specific ideas presented by each of the speakers. Let me first state, however, that the list of issues was compiled prior to my reading of the papers, and, in fact, these issues were used in the early planning for the conference to guide the selection of topics and presenters. However, while the set of issues was used as a general tool for organizing conference topics, individual speakers were not informed of the set of issues per se, but were asked to produce a paper addressing issues from their own perspectives. What I have done, then, is to read through the various papers and discovered which presenters have touched on the previously identified issues. Fortunately, the issues identified in advance have, indeed, been addressed by one or more presenters and may serve, therefore, the purpose of alerting the audience to what is to come.

Altogether I have identified eight issues that are of concern to the presenters and to others involved in adult literacy development:

(1) A need to better understand the adult literacy problem in the United States (an issue identified by most presenters). At issue here is how to best define the population(s) of concern; how to assess the skills and knowledges of adults; how to identify adults with "learning disabilities" from those who are simply in need of further education. Such identification and definitional problems have policy and programming implications that can affect millions of dollars in resources.

(2) Closely related to the first concern is the need to better understand the need for adults having different kinds of skills and knowledges for the future. This issue was of particular concern to those presenters discussing literacy in business and industry, manpower training, and the military (McCord; Tenopyr;Mangum;Duffy). This problem is a growing one with regard to the goal of improving our nations ability to compete in the international marketplace, and brings a new population into the realm of adult literacy development:

those workers with modest literacy skills who must learn a new, and perhaps more demanding set of skills and a more complex body of knowledge for applying those skills.

(3) According to most presenters, we need to have a better understanding of the various delivery systems for adult literacy development, their clients, and their effectiveness. Papers by Tenopyr, Roueche, and Gold, in particular, raise questions about the effectiveness of literacy programs in business and industry, community colleges, and prisons. Also, the representatives of voluntary organizations, Harris, Waite, and Eggert express concern for the proper implementation of community based programs.

(4) The problems of adults who must learn English as a Second Language raise issues unique to this population, and must be considered separately from the rest of adult basic education, according to Savage, Longfield, and Wallerstein. Of particular concern are the emotional reactions of adults newly arrived in our highly literate and technologically complex society who, themselves, may come from cultures in which there is little or no literacy, and little technology. Such lack of "world knowledge" relevant to adaptation to our culture and language poses special learning problems for this population.

(5) Closely related to the issues surrounding the teaching of English as a Second Language is the need to understand literacy problems in the United States context by comparison to to the literacy problems in the rest of the world (suggested especially by the papers of Wallerstein and Longfield). At issue here is the extent to which the methods and approaches to literacy development on other countries might be applicable in the United States. For instance, it has been suggested that the United States should mobilize a mass campaign against illiteracy as was done in Cuba and other third-world countries (Kozol,). The question is, is such an approach suitable given the differences between the United States, where many of the clients of adult literacy programs have had a fair amount of formal education and failed to develop higher levels of literacy, in contrast to many less developed nations in which many and perhaps most adults have had no formal education.

(6) An issue of central concern for all of the presenters is the need to under-

stand the differences between the development of literacy during childhood and in adulthood. For most presenters, this concern took the form of noting the importance of ensuring that the literacy program take into account the particular needs of the adults in the program, and that, much more so than with children, the relevance of what is to be taught and learned to the adult's needs be explicit. Also, it was noted by several presenters that contrary to the expressed beliefs of some adult educators and the general public, many adult students require more time to learn language and literacy skills than do typical students learning during childhood. (Duffy;Gold;Longfield;Wallerstein) This challenges the use of brief programs of concentrated study with many adult literacy students and argues for a more extended program of education for adults than is typically achieved, particularly if they are to reach the higher levels of skills outlined by Chall (1983), or for a more targeted approach to specific literacy skills such as those needed in a particular job (Duffy;Mangum) or academic program (Roueche).

(7) Given the special requirements of adults, as indicated above, some presenters suggested the need to better understand the use of technology in the development and delivery of adult literacy programs (Mangum;Duffy;Roueche;Longfield). In this regard, the concept of "technology" was extended to include not only obvious things such as computers, television, and radio, but also technology for instructional systems development, such as used in the military, to derive the literacy requirements of various settings in which adults will be required to perform literacy tasks, such as in job settings, community college academic classrooms, community environments like banks, hospitals, etc, and even elementary classroom settings if adults are involved in parent participation programs in the schools,and to develop instruction appropriate to these needs. Systematic evaluation, such as is used in adult "competency-based" programs also comprises part of the technological armamentarium that several presenters suggested to be brought to bear on the design and development of adult literacy programs (Mangum;Gold;Duffy;Tenopyr;Roueche).

(8) The eighth issue identified by presenters concerns the need for a clearly articulated national policy for adult literacy development that would place adult literacy

development in the context of our total commitment to adult education and training, including, for example, post-secondary education, military education assistance, Job Training Partnership Act, vocational education,business and industry training, federal correctional system, etc.), and in relation to childhood education. With regard to childhood education, it is noted by Mangum that "illiteracy has its detrimental intergenerational impacts, as well as its current costs in unemployment, poverty and social embarrassment". In this way Mangum calls attention to the fact that typically children who come from homes in which the parents are illiterate or only marginally literate become the next generation of students who do poorly in school and who may drop out of school and find themselves eligible for adult basic education. Because of this intergenerational relationship between the literacy skills of adults and their children, our education policies at federal, state, and local levels need to be reviewed to find approaches which best encourage the intergenerational transmission of literacy.

Summary of Issues

In summary, then, I have identified eight major issues that are addressed by one or more of the presenters at this conference. I will list them once more so that those in the audience who wish to be alert for comments relevant to each issue can note them. The issues are:

(1) The need to better understand the adult literacy problem in the United States.

(2) The need to better understand the need for adults having different kinds of skills and knowledges for the future.

(3) The need to have better understanding of the various delivery systems for adult literacy development, their clients, and their effectiveness.

(4) The need to better understand the problems of adult education for teaching English as a Second Language.

(5) The need to understand literacy problems in the United States context by comparison to the literacy problems in the rest of the world.

(6) The need to understand the differences between the development of literacy during childhood and in adulthood.

(7) The need to better understand the use of technology in the development and delivery of adult literacy education.

(8) The need for a clearly articulated national policy for human resources development that would place adult literacy development in relation to other adult education and training activities and to childhood education.